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# Conclusions From the ASC Conference on Communications and Control in Social Processes-October 31-November 2, 1974 at the University of Pennsylvania (USA)

Klaus Krippendorff

*University of Pennsylvania*, [kkrippendorff@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:kkrippendorff@asc.upenn.edu)

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# Conclusions From the ASC Conference on Communications and Control in Social Processes-October 31-November 2, 1974 at the University of Pennsylvania (USA)

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ASC CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND CONTROL IN SOCIAL PROCESSES-OCTOBER 31-NOVEMBER 2, 1974 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (USA)

### *(Implications for Policy)*

Conference participants, on the assumption that a cybernetic orientation could contribute to the solution of contemporary problems of scientific and public policy, gathered at a concluding seminar out of which came the following recommendations:

*I. Many emergent social problems arise from circular flows of information or are the product of unrestrained mutual causation. Their solution should be sought in the underlying control processes involved.*

Common to many current social problems is their sudden emergence. Population explosion, information overload, pollution, racial strife, the energy shortage, for example, are often perceived as "crises," not so much because they are entirely unpredictable but because of the failure of the Social Sciences to recognize their initially slow but usually exponential development before critical thresholds are reached. Research methods in the Social Sciences are largely geared to identify single or at best multiple causes of events but are relatively powerless when it comes to understanding the circular causal fabric of many social phenomena. Control engineering, on the other hand, has been preoccupied with morphostatic mechanisms seeking simple stabilities. Attempts at compensatory controls-as exemplified by responses to higher crime rates with more policemen-is likely to produce other unanticipated social problems not to mention the high costs involved and limited resources available for such efforts.

It is suggested that social problems emerging from the "vicious circles" of mutual causation, from the self-reinforcing nature of social prejudices and from circular information flows can be anticipated by adequate techniques of analysing positive feedback processes and that solutions to those problems might be found in the rearrangement of interdependent variables.

*II. A better understanding of Social change requires a greater focus on structural formulations of social processes.*

On the one hand, most social systems models assume continuous linear changes. Merely increasing the number of variables in those models-a recent trend that is exemplified by many global economic models or world models of resource uses, etc.-does not change this fundamental limitation. On the other hand, many social changes occur in steps and might be considered qualitative in nature; revolutions, wars and catastrophies being extreme cases in point, more moderate examples are found in the social-structural adjustments to modern technology.

For example, the structural changes we are witnessing seem to be facilitated largely by the new technologies of communication and of information processing around which new industries, new institutional complexes, new organizational forms and new social practices have grown.

While linear models of social systems might appropriate under morphostatic conditions, they have proven incapable of understanding how quantitative changes evolve into structural changes; how morphogenesis takes place in society. To understand, predict and perhaps control

ongoing, social processes, nonlinear models of structural change are needed and should be developed.

*III. In policy decisions and in social research, attention should be directed to the social consequences of differential accessibility and unequal distribution of information.*

While most decisional formulations assume knowledge to be equally distributed and sufficient for rational solutions to be forthcoming, differential access to modern information processing technologies and telecommunications has greatly enlarged the inequality in the distribution of information in society. And, by eroding the traditional socio-cultural controls on how knowledge is to be acquired and applied, this technology has favoured the emergence of socio-technological controls that are hardly rationally comprehended or sufficiently understood. This unintended shift is manifest in numerous concerns such as the fear of the invasion of privacy, the fear of the increased institutional ability to confine the flow of public information, the fear of loss of democratic control.

Attention should be given to the unanticipated social changes in community and in social structure caused by unequal access to and distribution of information, to the political, social and scientific value of information, to the costs of selective information processing including the costs of violating privacy, and to the interests that the selective dissemination of information might serve.

*IV. In planning policy, systems considerations should be given preference over sectional decision making.*

Most policy planning is oriented to the maximization of separate goals in separate sectors such as health, education, pollution, international relations, and the economy. These sectors are far from independent, however. Decisions in one sector are communicated and may alter the conditions for decision making in another. And, what serves one sector well may be detrimental to another. Sectional decision making, while politically expedient ignores the vital links that hold highly developed societies together and results in a sub-optimal quality of life.

Systems conceptions for policy decision that take account of these possibly complex interdependencies should be developed and cybernetics with its focus on Feedback communication processes should be employed to achieve this end.

*V. Contextual effects of technology transfer from industrialized to less industrialized countries should be examined cybernetically.*

Most decisions on the technology across national or cultural boundaries assume similar and desirable effects, whereas evidence indicates that despite well intended technical aid programs, differences in standard of living between affluent and poorer countries in most cases is increasing. Additionally, the political stability that such technology requires, tends in fact to be diminishing. To a degree better than chance, technology transfer has aided military dictatorships and the suppression of individual freedoms.

These discouraging facts are born out of a lack of understanding the culturally rooted knowledge base of societies other than our own, the communication networks that transform

such knowledge into social action and that channel social action back into knowledge and the variables that are and that are not controllable in less industrialized countries. Technologies are the product of fertile socio-institutional environments with which they interact and through which they grow. Decisions on technology transfer should be preceded by an examination of how these "transplants" are taken by the "organism," the nature of the interactions they facilitate and the reorganizing processes they may set in motion. The development of adequate models of the social and political functions of technologies should be encouraged to make technology transfers more meaningful in the terms set forth by the aided countries themselves.

K. KRIPPENDORF

University of Pennsylvania

The Annenberg School of Communications (C5.)

Philadelphia,

Pa. 19174 (USA)